Rakuin no Monshou SS - The Little Fugitive

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The Little Fugitive

Part 1

“Lord Gil”

An intrepid-looking young man – no, his appearance was better called that of a boy’s – halted his steps as a voice called out. His name was Orba.

He had been born in a nameless country village. And until a few months ago, he had been a gladiator, a slave forced to risk his life in combat for the amusement of the crowd.

He turned around even though he had been called by another person’s name, “Gil”. The location was the palace in Solon, the capital of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius. Originally, given Orba’s social position, he should not have been able to even approach the palace gates, let alone set foot inside them.

Gil Mephius was the only child of his Imperial Majesty Emperor Guhl Mephius and was the crown prince and heir to the throne. Although Orba was a slave, by some twist of fate he and the crown prince looked like two peas in a pod. And so, a few months ago and on the orders of a certain noble, he had come to live at the palace in Gil’s stead.

Ostensibly he was doing so as a body-double but in the shadows, that noble planned to use him to control the country from behind the scenes. At the same time, Orba also had his own motives but for now, they were on hold.

The one who had called out to Orba as “Gil Mephius” was a young girl by the name of Vileena Owell whose platinum hair was swaying as she ran up to him. Fourteen years old. Some months earlier she had come to Mephius from the neighbouring country Garbera. She was Crown Prince Gil’s fiancée.

Mephius and Garbera had been at war for ten years. A feeling of war-weariness having started to spread throughout both countries, it was decided that the two young people would be engaged as proof of the cessation of hostilities and of the alliance.

And thus we arrive at today, after they had eaten breakfast together.

After hurriedly paying his courtesies to the assembled imperial family and to his fiancée, Orba had rushed out to the palace corridor.

He was pressed for time. In two weeks, he would be leaving the capital at the head of an army and would make his way towards Apta, a fortress at the western edge of Mephius. He was to hold a western leader, Ax Bazgan, in check. Organising the troops, inspecting the equipment, making arrangements for the non-combatants – there was a lot he needed to do.

As he arrived in the corridor with his head full of plans, the princess lost no time in chasing after him.

What the…

Had he done something rude, Orba wondered bitterly. To reiterate, he was a man who had been a slave until a few months earlier. He was not used to the manners of imperial or royal families. Grumbling inwardly, he resigned himself to the coming scolding by the fourteen-year-old girl. Such was their relationship.

“Have you heard about Lady Flora?”

“Flora?” Hearing an unexpected name, Orba tilted his head a little.

Flora was a child of the emperor’s second wife from her first marriage, and as such was Gil’s younger step-sister to whom he was not related by blood. She was probably eleven or twelve years old. She had a shy personality and Orba himself had hardly spoken to her except for formal courtesies. She had no doubt also been at the breakfast table earlier but she left so weak an impression that no matter how much he wracked his brains, he couldn’t remember it.

As he was wondering if something had happened with Flora, what the princess from the neighbouring country was saying became increasingly incomprehensible.

“It seems that at the recent Founding Festival, one of the other countries presented a Schypa kitten as a congratulatory gift. Apparently, Lady Flora had been telling those closest to her for a long time that she wished for one so, at their own discretion, they secretly sent a messenger beforehand. She was overjoyed.”

“A cat.”

They were rare animals in Solon. And Schypa cats even more so. He had heard that they were a breed that only lived in the eastern part of the continent and that they were popular pets.

“But not long ago, when Lady Flora took it to play in the garden and had taken her eyes off it for a moment, it ran away.”

“Oh.”

“Lady Flora has always been quiet but now she barely speaks all day she is so depressed. Your Highness must have seen it too just now. She barely touched her food. If this continues, sooner or later she will collapse.”

"That so."

Thinking that at any rate it didn’t look like he was going to be scolded, Orba made a noncommittal response.

"This is your little sister. What kind of response is "That so"?"

Vileena’s eyes immediately flared at the corners.

Damn.

Orba realised that this time, he had definitely messed up and been rude. Unbefitting of her lovely appearance and small stature, once this princess had decided that the other person was an “enemy”, she would press them without any mercy. That would be the case even if her own life was being threatened with a sword or a gun.

Orba felt exactly as though he had been caught in an enemy trap.

“A great many people will already be searching the palace anyway. It will be found soon. You don’t need to worry about it, Princess.”

“That is not the problem. Certainly, I have only just come from a foreign country. It is presumptuous of me to act as though I know anything and to barge in, but that person – Lady Flora, she looks as though she is always alone.”

For a moment, Vileena went off the offensive and quickly averted her eyes.

Orba realised that she had not only come to talk about the cat. As she herself had said, Vileena had only just come from a foreign country. Moreover, until very recently, Mephius and the princess’ native land Garbera had been long-time foes engaged in a bloody war.

Vileena had surely superimposed her own isolation and Flora’s situation. And so, she had come with a request for comfort from him, the older brother – in other words, she wanted him to look after Flora more.

However,

According to the chamberlain, Gil had a good relationship with his other step-sister Ineli Mephius but practically no one has ever seen him talk with Flora.

Orba had been taught beforehand about what kind of relationship Gil had with the people who were socially close to him. Basically, that was so that he could play his part without raising any doubts – without there being any suspicion that Gil had been replaced by a sword slave.

Even as it was, since Prince Gil, who was known as a “fool” to those around him, had accomplished a series of heroic feats, he had heard that while on one hand he was being praised by those around him, there were also many who were voicing suspicion about his change.

“So,” having resigned himself to the fact that at this point he should act like Prince Gil, Orba responded in a somewhat fed up tone of voice. “Once the cat is found, Flora will cheer up soon enough. It’s nothing big. Right, more importantly, Princess, have you finished your preparations for leaving for Apta? I still have a few things that –”

“Indeed, given your position, Your Highness is busy. I know that and yet I held

you back because of something foolish. My apologies.”

Tsk.

The reason why Orba immediately felt like clicking his tongue was because, although she courteously bowed her head, Vileena’s eyes were openly blazing with anger.

Why are women like this?

The afternoon of the same day, Orba had left his room in the palace about an hour before the sun set.

Incidentally, his right arm was in a sling since during the conflict a few days earlier he had received an injury that had fractured his collarbone.

They think that everyone should give their situation priority.

Vileena’s concerns were all well and good, but Orba had never held any kind feelings towards the aristocracy. Quite the opposite: from the bottom of his heart, he hated Mephian nobles so much that he wanted to take a sword and behead the whole lot of them as soon as possible.

The Mephian army had robbed Orba of his family and of everyone he knew from the village he had been born and raised in. One of his reasons for spending each day as the prince’s body-double was to get revenge on those with power.

A kitten has disappeared? So she wants me to do something because she’s not eating?

Completely ridiculous. If she didn’t want to eat, then don’t serve her food. Her stomach would get empty soon enough and then she wouldn’t go on about where-oh-where her kitten was.

“My, Your Highness. You look furious.”

Shique, an Imperial Guard, chuckled. They had known each other since their

days as sword slaves. He knew the whole story about Orba playing the role of Mephius' Crown Prince. As there were other people around, he deliberately called him "Your Highness".

While they were watching the Imperial Guards training, the two of them were in the middle of deciding the troop formation.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing."

"You will have quarrelled with the princess again."

"Nothing happened."

Shique had keen intuition. Since Orba was about to look the other way, he forcefully grabbed his face with both hands.

"Now, now. If you make such a scary face, the soldiers will get nervous. Do smile."

"Shut up. Let go."

Shique had a face like a woman's but as was to be expected from a former gladiator, he was strong.

"Ha, ha, ha. Your Highness is being shy."

"Bastard, don't fuck with –"

"Look, if you're like that," having suddenly brought his face closer, Shique whispered in his ear, "you will soon betray your true colours. You're always calm on the battlefield but you're not very good at handling emotions. Especially when it has anything to do with the princess. Always keep your senses strained, Orba. Otherwise, it wouldn't be surprising even if your head was sliced off from behind. After all, this place is far scarier than the coliseum."

Orba remained silent. Afterwards he shook free of Shique's hands by force.

"Well, if you feel like relaxing your guard, you can always come to my room.

I'll listen to your complaining."

"That's like jumping naked into a dragon's den."

"It's fine, isn't it? More importantly, they're here."

Shique pointed. In a corner of the training grounds, there was a pavilion with an overhanging roof. Several men had turned up there.

As Orba approached, they respectfully bowed their heads. Just like Shique, they were acquaintances from when he was a gladiator but unlike Shique they didn't know about him. For certain reasons, Orba had always worn a mask back then so they didn't know his real face. They believed that the man who sat before them truly was Crown Prince Gil of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.

Gil was their benefactor. The gladiators belonging to the Tarkas Group had been falsely accused of attempting to assassinate the crown prince and had very nearly been executed. Perhaps on a whim, the crown prince had taken all of them, over a hundred gladiators, into service as his own Imperial Guards.

Gil, whose speech and conduct were unbecoming of a crown prince, had originally been called a 'fool' by those around him. Rumour had it that ignoring his position as heir to the throne, he played around all day and that he spent no time at all on martial arts or on study.

And yet, these past few months and since personally forming his Imperial Guards unit, he had for some reason started to distinguish himself remarkably. When Garbera's renowned General Ryucown rose to action as the leader of the anti-Mephius faction, he killed him with only a few troops, including the Imperial Guards. Not only that, but when the treacherous vassal, Zaat Quark, had been going to rebel against the emperor during Mephius' Founding Festival, he had foiled the scheme before it could be carried out.

Far from being a 'fool', Prince Gil was now the new hero of Mephius.

The Imperial Guards did not know that his real identity was a gladiator from the same Tarkas Group as they who had once been made to kill each other before the populace simply so that they could live one more day.

"Report," Orba cast a glance at the men's faces then spoke. "Ah, and it won't do

if you say that there's nothing like last time. Whether there's something or not is for me to decide. I'm sure I ordered you to just submit the information you collect, no matter how trivial it is."

"Aye."

Shique stifled a smile as he watched his former comrades lower their heads with a nervous expression. About sixty of the former sword slaves currently remained in his unit of Imperial Guards. Quite a few more swordsmen had asked to stay within the ranks but Orba had purposely selected several from among them and had separated them from the unit, assigning them instead to various parts of the imperial capital, Solon.

The purpose was to gather information.

Their pay was no less than that of the Imperial Guards and each of them lived as inhabitants of Solon. They didn't do anything special. They went to work so as not to attract suspicion from their neighbours. Their job was to send Orba – no, Crown Prince Gil – information about the various things that happened in their daily lives.

Since all of them could write, they were summoned together about once every five days to submit written reports. Of course, most of it meant nothing to Orba. Things like the mother next-door apparently being pregnant again despite already having lots of children, or the cost of vegetables at the market having gone up, or, today again, a drunkard getting into a fight at his usual time.

Orba liked learning. He especially liked it when, reading a book, he came across worlds and information that he didn't know and came in touch with different senses of values. But that alone wasn't enough. Now after Zaat's rebellion, what he particularly wanted was news that was fresh.

"This is?"

Orba picked out several of the documents and asked for a detailed verbal report. That day, what caught his attention was a complaint by a man who ran a certain tavern.

"It seems that once a month, when the miners who work in the mountains near Solon receive their pay, they make a point of stopping by that store. But last

month and now this month too, they suddenly stopped going for some reason. He was moping over whether they had found another place they liked."

"Hmm."

Orba nodded convincingly but it wasn't as though he was carefully scrutinizing all of the proffered information. However, with the news that they brought, he would form a faint picture in his mind and would sense the atmosphere of places that he couldn't see with his own eyes. Orba believed that even from that alone, he could broaden his field of vision.

"Good, this time it was passable."

When Orba set down the documents near to hand, the men looked relieved.

"Keep it up. Let me know if there is anything you need. I'll have it prepared for you later."

Just as they were about to leave,

"Wait," Orba called out sharply to stop them.

Wondering what it was, their expressions once again tense, the men stood still but for some reason Gil Mephius seemed reluctant to speak.

"Your Highness," just as Shique was about to prompt him,

"Cat."

"A cat?"

"Cats… Do you know about them? Especially Schypa cats. They're rare in Solon."

"Yes…?"

"I want you to look for a cat. Snow white fur and heterochromatic eyes. Do you understand? It has one golden eye and one blue one. A ribbon was apparently tied to the tip of its tail but I don't know if it will still be there or not. Its name is Nelwin but if you call it, I don't know if it will answer to it."

Orba spoke especially fast.

After the dubious-looking men had left, Orba quickly stood up. Before Shique could say anything,

“Call Gowen for me. I have to talk to him about the slaves that were added to the troops after the rebellion.”

“Truly,” Shique replied, fighting back laughter so hard that his eyes were twitching, “truly. Your Highness is very busy.”

Part 2

Five days later, there had been no progress.

Preparations for Apta were advancing smoothly. What there had been no progress in was the search for the cat.

During that time, Flora had been wondering helplessly whether Nelwin was eating, whether he had a proper roof to sleep under, whether he was being tormented by anyone, and she persistently talked about it to the ladies’ maids, so that apparently they were secretly at their wits’ end.

On the day for the reports.

Orba left the palace. But not as Gil Mephius. He was dressed like a swordsman and wore an iron mask shaped like a tiger – in other words, he went as Gil’s subordinate, ‘the Imperial Guard Orba’. He used both personas depending on the situation. Because as the Crown Prince, he could not come and go from the palace as he pleased.

So that they would not be suspected of being the same person, he had removed the bandages from his right arm. Of course, it still hurt. With each step, pain from the gunshot wound rang through his brain but he walked to a medium-sized tavern in a corner of Solon while trying not to let it show.

On the second floor [1], in a room that was sectioned off by a wall, practically the same people as had been summoned to the castle five days earlier were lined up.

If he invited them to the palace too often, those around him would become suspicious. Just because they came from the same country did not necessarily mean that they were Orba's allies. On the contrary, if the suspicions of those around him deepened, the secret of Orba's identity might be revealed.

And so, Orba himself sometimes went to town in this way to meet with them.

Today as well he had gone to see and hear the reports made by his subordinates. On the whole, the former gladiators understood what Orba was after but there were still some among them who were not on point.

How many more times do I have to say it! – There had been times when he had burst out angrily in spite of himself but right now, Orba was not the crown prince. Since he was only a messenger, he simply said,

"I'll pass it on to the prince."

He cleared his throat once by way of punctuation.

"And also… The prince seems to be concerned about it. About that Schypa cat," he asked but the results weren't very good after all.

Although he had thought about widening the search range, since there had not even been a rumour of anyone having seen it, it was unfortunate for Flora but it was safe to assume that the worst had happened.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise from near the entrance of the shop.

Followed by a voice that sounded like a scream.

Surprised, Orba grabbed his sword from behind his chair, ran to the gap in the wall and peered hard down the stairs.

A man dressed in rags was panting. He had a burly build and gave the impression that he was engaged in a pretty rough line of work but that he probably didn't get enough to eat as he was painfully thin. Through the tears all over his clothes his naked back could fleetingly be seen.

A brand…

It was the same sign that was etched into Orba's back. A long vertical line running through the centre of an 'X' mark. In Mephius, it stood for only one thing – it was the mark from a hot iron indicating the status of a slave.

It didn't look like the man had run to the tavern as a set destination but that he had somehow ended up taking refuge there. His expression fierce, he thrust aside the customers and employees near the entrance and forcefully tried to make his way to the back of the store but,

"Stop!"

A large number of guards appeared next and easily captured him.

It was not a particularly rare scene in Mephius. A slave unable to endure the harsh work and environment attempting to flee. The commotion as soldiers ran in pursuit.

Orba turned his gaze away from the ground floor. For he who bore the same brand, it unexpectedly took him a lot of effort to do so.

Then, just before the man who had until then been struggling and shouting to "Let go!" was finally about to be dragged out from the store,

"Somebody, help me," he cried. "I'm not a slave. I was set up. Oddwill tricked me!"

Then like that, he passed out of sight and his voice could no longer be heard.

Afterwards, as though no such occurrence had happened, the shop returned to its usual appearance and liveliness. Voices flew about from all over ordering alcohol and food.

Orba also chased from his mind the image of the slave he had seen just a moment ago. Even if he had once been in the same position, he was currently in a situation where it could be possible for him to save one or two slaves but if he did that for every slave he encountered, it was obvious that he would simply be walking the path to his own destruction.

Before long, Orba handed his men generous amounts of drinking money ‘from the prince’ that was separate from their wages and left the tavern by himself.

Now then…

It had been a long time since he had been out of the palace. Although he was tempted to wander around for a bit, in a way, a man wearing a mask was more eye-catching than the crown prince.

Even in an alleyway with few passers-by, he could feel a gaze coming from the first floor, perhaps in part because the masked swordsman Orba had won the gladiatorial games at the recent Founding Festival.

Thinking that he should quietly head back, he had just turned that way when,

"Ah!" He cried out unintentionally.

Two round lights were gleaming from the top of a pile of rubbish heaped in the alleyway.

Orba was just about to advance towards it without thinking. The lights seemed to fly up to the sky – in an instant, the creature that looked white even in the dark leaped a few times along the ground towards where there was a gap between the walls and the entrance to a small alley yawned open before vanishing into it.

"Wait" Once again crying out unintentionally, Orba began to run.

Something red was wrapped around the tip of its tail. Although it had lost its original form, it was probably what remained of a ribbon. Given the white fur, it was unmistakably the much-searched for Nelwin.

However, the more he gave chase, the faster Nelwin went. Orba's method of doing things was to work out a strategy to corner the enemy but right now, there was no time for that. Since it would be lost from sight if he didn't keep it in a corner of his eye, all he could do was sprint with all his might.

After going down two then three alleys, he arrived at a wall that was more than twice as tall as a human. Someone's mansion no doubt. At the same moment as Orba, seeing it driven to the wall, grinned broadly beneath his mask, Nelwin came to a hole formed by a gap between the wall and the ground and smoothly

slipped inside.

Not again.

It seemed that the animals known as cats were creatures that roamed the area around them, investigating it and turning it into their own playground. In a sense, it was similar to how Orba did things. But in the circumstances, he did not feel like admiring it.

Without hesitation, Orba bounded towards a nearby tree, hauled himself up it by the strength of his arms and legs then jumped in the direction of the wall. His fingers unerringly grasped the edge. He then kicked the surface of the wall and leapt to the inner side.

Inside was a thicket of bushes and, further in, a flower garden stretched out. Orba, who had landed on the thick branch of a tree, looked at the two round eyes right beneath him. They were looking up at him. But immediately upon meeting Orba's eyes, Nelwin started running again. For some reason, it looked like it was making fun of him.

"Son of a bitch." There would be no more mercy. Orba rushed forward anew.

Pushing his way through the flowers' stalks and leaves and occasionally getting scratched by thorns, he went further and further inward. Even when it scrambled up a wall again and went along the roofs of buildings, Orba kept on running after it.

When even he was about to run out of breath, the surroundings changed. The orderly rows of houses had faded into the distance and the roads were no longer paved. The lights had also petered out and the surroundings were plunged in darkness. A stench assailed his nose. It was smell that blended alcohol, sewage and human excretions like sweat and urine.

The slums.

Every town had them. Those who could not pay the neighbourhood and town taxes gathered there, or perhaps rather, they lived there in isolation. Despite his current position as Crown Prince, it was a nostalgic place for Orba. It hadn't been in Solon but before he had become a sword slave, he had lived in an area like this.

"Hup"

As he kicked off the end of a roof and jumped down onto the wall that surrounded a different building, Orba was definitely narrowing the distance with Nelwin. That was because, while he unfalteringly chased after it, the cat had slowed down.

Good.

Orba had already stopped running and was stalking forward while stooping down so as to catch the cat that was gracefully sashaying its backside from left to right. The wall was at the height of the building's first floor. Nelwin jumped through a nearby window with a practised movement.

Now was a good chance.

It was dark inside. Without wasting any time, Orba noiselessly jumped into the room.

If there was someone there, they had fallen asleep. Just when he had come to that conclusion and was about to stretch out his hands towards the cat,

“Who is it?”

A sharp voice spoke and at the same time, a girl stared at him from the bed.

Shit.

“You are…”

Maybe it was because she had just woken up, the girl was open-mouthed as she gazed fixedly at Orba.

She was looking at his mask.

It would have been better if it had been at his actual face, even though it was identical to the prince’s. Since there were many among the people who did not know the Crown Prince’s face, whereas this mask was far too distinctive. You could tell at a glance that he was ‘the prince’s subordinate’ Orba.

He went rigid for a moment and right then, he heard footsteps pounding violently up the stairs.

“Alicia!”

The door was flung open and a woman came bursting in.

Although she must have been beautiful when she was young – which would have been only a few years ago – her face was gaunt and her clothes were slightly stained. Of course, given that she was living in such a place, her life could not be easy.

On the bed, the girl she had called Alicia looked blank.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Just now, weren’t you talking to someone!”

Her breathing ragged, her mother carefully swept her eyes around all four corners then cautiously stepped forward. She lit the lamp that was by the bed.

“You mean with Yamā?”

When her mother looked in the direction that Alicia indicated with a sweeping wave of her neck, she saw the cat by the window. It lifted its rump and stretched contentedly. Her mother breathed a sigh of relief.

“You mustn’t open your window. You don’t know who might see you.”

She nervously closed the fastening and shut the curtains. Alicia pulled her blanket up to hide her face and nodded.

“Ye~es”

Her mother smiled weakly at her joking gesture and gently stroked Alicia’s honey-coloured hair.

“Now, go to sleep you. Mother was busy today so I couldn’t read you a book but

I will tomorrow.”

“Hn”

Her mother caressed Alicia’s hair one more time then put out the bedside lamp and left the room.

Along with the darkness, silence fell inside the room. Once or twice, a drunkard could be heard shouting in the distance. Then,

“It’s all right now.”

When Alicia said that, there was a rustling sound in the dark room that came from the area under the bed. The one who came crawling out from under there was Orba, still wearing his mask.

Where was the figure who acted like the Crown Prince during the day, it was now as wretched as that of a married woman’s lover who had crept into her bedroom at night. When he had been found out by the girl, Orba’s blood had run cold but she had stared at him for a moment with wide-open eyes but, when footsteps came from staircase and whilst still turned towards him, she had hurriedly said, “Hide. There’s a gap under the bed. There.”

Alicia giggled.

“Hey, it’s good that you weren’t found out. Mama doesn’t look it but she’s scary when she’s angry. Recently, a drunk got into the house and she chased him out with a broom.”

She must have been more or less ten years old. There was no shyness in her bright smile.

“Why did you help me? Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Because, maybe it’s the latest fashion?”

“Fashion?"

“Smelling like the gutter and sneaking into my room. Yamā also came in through my window about a week ago.”

The one Alicia called ‘Yamā’ was, of course, ‘Nelwin’ who was now leisurely grooming itself by the window.

“I thought cats were timid animals but they’re bold. From the very start, he’s been behaving as if it was his own home.”

Every day this little intruder would call there at almost the exact same time and would relax idly for a while in the same room as Alicia then, as if on another whim, would disappear.

“And then, it reminds me of an old legend.”

“A legend?”

“A story about a young man who gets lost in a forest and finds a golden bird and then while chasing it discovers a princess who has been locked in a tower by an evil magician. I love that story so I was thinking won’t a cool man visit my room too someday. But the one who came wasn’t a prince but scary scary man who smells like the gutter.”

Alicia giggled again. Although she was looking in Orba’s direction, her eyes were unfocused. At first, he had thought that it was because she had just woken up but hearing her emphasize ‘smell’, he realised the reason.

The girl was probably blind. Because of that, she was not suspicious about his mask.

“Is that ‘Princess Katjua’?”

At Orba’s words, Alicia opened her sightless eyes wide.

“It’s a really old, oooold legend from Garbera. You know it?”

“I read it in a book once. But it’s weird to love something like that. Doesn’t it end tragically? The young man defeated the magician but because he was hit by the magician’s final spell, he transformed into a golden bird. The story goes that the princess wandered eternally looking for the bird that had flown from the tower.”

“Is it such a sad story?” Looking as though her pleasure had been dampened, the

girl wrinkled her nose. “After receiving advice from the golden bird, the young man and the princess defeat the magician and live happily ever after in the tower. Isn’t your memory wrong?”

“My memory is accurate. It’s you who’ll have misunderstood.”

It was a fact that Orba hated admitting defeat. He had gotten unintentionally wound-up.

“Right. Maybe the book I read was different from the one you did. Legends get written by a lot of different people and depending on their mood, they can change into comedies or tragedies,” Alicia said and sighed almost half-pityingly.

He was in situation where a younger girl was offering him a compromise. Blushing beneath his mask, Orba changed the subject.

“Do you read that many books?”

“I love books. I learned about cats from a picture book that my mum gave me before.” After proudly saying that, she seemed to notice the question Orba had and the meaning of her smile shifted a little. “I could see before. Back then, I read a lot of books, so many that I can’t even count.”

“Back then means…?”

“Hmm, how long ago was back then? Not being able to see anything, I’ve almost forgotten my sense of time. Mama said that I caught a nasty infectious disease in an epidemic. That’s also why we moved house… I’ll only have to be patient for a short while so it’s fine but Mama says that I can’t meet anyone until then.”

An epidemic? Orba was inwardly doubtful. He hadn’t heard of that kind of disease being rampant in Solon.

“Mama says that if I stay quiet then I’ll definitely get better soon, but it’s been a really long time that I haven’t met my friends. I wonder if everyone is doing well. I want to introduce Yamā to Roché and Eris. Ah, and of course, you too since you’re Yamā’s friend.”

It was no doubt true that she hadn’t met anybody for a long time. It was probably because she had found a human to talk to for the first time in a long time that

Alicia was chattering non-stop on what was their first time meeting – and to a man whose identity she didn't know.

"Big Brother, what did you say your name was?"

"A thief doesn't give their own name."

"Oh? A thief who specializes in cats? That sounds like it would also make an interesting story… Okay, since you don't want to tell, I'll give you a name that I can call you by. How about Bartz Endora?"

"The one who served Allion's Founding King and who was originally a bandit leader."

"You really know a lot. Not happy with it?"

"Bartz was stabbed in the back by his comrades and died. Anyway, Orba is fine. It's the name of the former gladiator who won the championship at the last Founding Festival."

"Orba? Is that the winner's name?"

"He's a cool swordsman who wears a mask."

They talked idly. Not having to worry about his identity being known made Orba more talkative but it wasn't only because of the pleasure of exchanging words. The girl felt strangely out of place.

She has too much culture.

Obviously, most of the people who lived in a place like this had a hard time making it from day to day. He didn't think they had the money to spare to buy books. Moreover, her mother wore drab and dirty clothes whereas Alicia's were clean and beautiful and were made of fine cotton with embroidery.

They must have lived a wealthy life before. Had the family fallen for some reason or had they run away? Orba reasoned that the mother might have bundled up and brought as many clothes as she could.

And above all else, there were Alicia's circumstances. Her mother would not let

her daughter meet with anyone and was keeping her isolated exactly as though she really was suffering from an illness. Perhaps it was related to the cause behind the loss of Alicia's eyesight.

"Even your favourite book would get boring if you read it every day."

"Absolutely!" Alicia nodded vigorously over and over again. "That's why I always end up completely wrapped up in my imagination. I remember the stories I read in the old days and put myself in the main character's place. If it was me, I'd do this, or if it was me, rather than the prince, I'd choose the knight as my lover and I create a story just for me."

"That's it!"

"That's what?"

"I bet it's because you go around changing stories this way and that, you mix up the real story and your imagined story and so you remember wrong."

"Orba, you're pretty persistent, huh…"

At some point, perhaps because it had gotten tired of grooming itself by the window, Yamā had climbed onto Alicia's lap and was relaxing there snugly. Unlike Orba, it was not confused by its change of environment and he could almost envy how impudent it was.

"Is your mother always strict?"

"Usually. But after we came here she might have become scarier than before."

"And your father?"

"My father –"

While he waited for Alicia's answer, Orba surveyed the inside of the room. There was nothing except a single plain bed. There was neither table nor wardrobe. There were cracks in the wall and stains spread out across it here and there.

He heard Yamā cry out. When Orba glanced at him, his body was shaking. No, it

wasn’t the cat that was shaking, it was the girl’s hand placed on his head that was trembling violently.

“What’s wrong, Alicia. Oi.”

Even though Orba called out, she didn’t answer. Far more than earlier, her gaze was aimlessly wandering in mid-air.

“F-Father is…” Alicia’s voice broke up midway as though she was choking on something. “Father is…”

Was she having an attack of her illness? Trembling continuously, Alicia blankly repeated herself while a single tear spilled from her wide-open eyes.

“Alicia, what’s wrong? You okay?”

As though to stop her trembling, Orba touched the girl’s shoulders.

Should I call her mother?

Just as he was wondering that, he heard a gentle cry that seemed to brush against his ears. The cat, Yamā or Nelwin or whatever, suddenly broke free of Alicia’s hands and, after rubbing itself against her feet for a while like a baby, it gave another nonchalant jump and left through the window.

“Ah!” Orba was about to involuntarily call out and stretch his hand.

“It’s all right even if you don’t hurry.”

When he turned to look back at Alicia who had suddenly mumbled that, the girl had regained her composure.

“He’ll come again tomorrow anyway. Orba, you came here to catch Yamā, right?”

“I received a request from the owner,” Orba answered, peering somewhat carefully at Alicia’s face. “But, well, I’m in no hurry either. If it takes more time, I’ll get more money for expenses.”

“Weren’t you a thief?”

“I changed jobs.”

Orba could tell from the girl’s expression that she wasn’t simply putting on a brave front. The fit she had just then when she had been about to talk about her father seemed to have completely fallen from her.

Anyhow,

She might well be ill but Orba’s inference was that it was somewhat different from the “infectious disease” her mother spoke about. He got up cautiously, the longsword at his waist making no sound.

“I’ll come back when the owner starts getting impatient.”

“Right – I open the window at about the same time as today for Yamā. You can come in again smelling like the gutter,” Alicia said. She smiled but somewhat feebly.

“Yeah. See ya.”

Leaving behind more regrets in that room than he himself would have expected, Orba crossed over the window frame and let himself down onto the top of the wall.

Oh?

On the other side of the wall were two round eyes. It was exactly as though it had been waiting for him but abruptly and with no waste of time, it turned its head away and, once more elegantly sashaying its behind, the schypa cat walked off.

Having returned to the palace, Orba advanced with the preparations for the departure to Apta throughout the next day but in the evening, he once more summoned his subordinates who were positioned all over Solon. To do so two days in a row was unusual and the men’s expressions were even more nervous than before.

“You can forget about the cat.”

After having displayed the kind of whim that was characteristic of those with power, the prince gave an order that was no less peculiar than searching for a cat.

“Alicia. I want you to collect information and rumours that have surfaced around this name. But do it casually and carefully. Don’t turn into a topic of gossip yourselves when you’re investigating about Alicia. In other words, do your best not to attract attention. If you don’t find information in one place, look somewhere else but don’t follow it too far. Got it?”

Less than three days later, he had the results.

Within Solon, there were at least ten or more girls with that name and of about the same age, but only one of them had gone missing.

In addition, there was a very interesting piece of information attached.

Her father was a man named Oddwill whose job had involved despatching labourers to the mines in the outskirts of the capital.

“Oddwill” was the name spoken by the slave who had fled to the tavern the other day and furthermore, speaking of the mines outside Solon, men who worked there were no longer turning up to their usual tavern.

Two more circumstances soon came to light.

Two months earlier, the Guards had arrested nearly five hundred of the labourers. Because it was discovered that they were guilty of illegally selling resources to a foreign country, almost all of them had been reduced to slavery. The one giving orders for the crime had been none other than Oddwill. He had been taken for re-questioning but had attempted to escape on the way and had been killed by soldiers.

Oddwill’s wife and only daughter had gone missing immediately afterwards.

If all of this was tied together, he could understand that Alicia had not been about to talk about her father. But at the same time, Orba felt that it didn’t sit well with him.

“Who was the one who accused the labourers?”

“A man named Jurgen Ozt. Since he is the noble who manages the mines on the outskirts of Solon, Oddwill was a subordinate who served under him.”

“Jurgen.”

It had only been a few months since Orba had become the prince’s body-double. He did not remember the face of every aristocrat.

“Your Highness,” watching this exchange from the back, Shique looked as though he couldn’t bear it any longer and whispered from behind. “Your Highness, you are very busy. The preparations are being hurried. Wouldn’t it be fine to leave these other matters to them?”

However Orba, his arms folded, didn’t move. Shique knew all too well that this was proof that he was plunged into thought and that when he was like that, he was inflexible.

Part 3

After having sent his mistress back, Jurgen Ozt, a dressing gown flung around his naked body, headed to the room where his subordinates were waiting.

From here on, I’ll be seeing Dach’s face.

The thought left Jurgen slightly depressed. He felt as though his sweet mood from spending time with a woman had vanished in an instant. But that man was devoted to his duties. That Dach periodically came to report to him was probably not just for the sake of harassing him.

There were ten or so men in the room, Dach included. He bowed, a longsword hanging from the leather armour covering his chest and waist. He was the only one within the mansion – the only one allowed to bear arms. His nose was oddly long but because of the intensity of his eyes, he did not strike one as being a

fool. With his long oval face and the fierce aura emitted from his entire being, he was a man who gave a similar impression to a small and somewhat wild dragon.

“Has there been any progress?”

Jurgen was the first to open his mouth and Dach bent his tall body forward.

“I am very sorry. Being after all from an upper-class household, I did not think that they would manage to lie hidden for long but at any rate, we can assume that they are not being sheltered at the house of an acquaintance. Tomorrow we will extend the scope beyond the city area.”

“Hmph, so they still haven’t been found.”

Jurgen appeared to be gazing at Dach with disdain but he was actually in a very cheerful mood. When spending time with a mistress in the bedroom, he had full confidence in being ‘lively’ to the end. And in relation to this matter, he had from the start taken an optimistic view of things.

“Conversely, it’s convenient that they’ve hidden themselves. They’re the wife and daughter of a criminal. Heh, even if Oddwill’s wife and daughter do plot something, it shouldn’t be any particular problem. Don’t you think so, Dach?”

He called a chamberlain and had him prepare drinks. He was about to offer one to Dach but the latter held up his hand in refusal.

“No.”

At his blunt reply, Jurgen’s expression turned displeased. Dach’s dragon-like countenance on the other hand didn’t change in the slightest.

“Obstacles should be removed without exception. Even if they are but like rubbish scattered at my lord’s feet. Some of them might have shards of glass within them and carelessly treading on them could lead to a serious injury.”

“I get that too.” Jurgen drew back the proffered glass and drained its contents himself.

His mansion was on the bank the River Sarzan. From the window, he could look down to the water’s surface that was sunk in shadows. The view wasn’t bad but

it was far from the palace. Even among the aristocrats living in Solon, there were differences.

Jurgen was by no means a high-ranking noble. Having only been granted the task of developing the mines on the outskirts of Solon, his political influence and military strength were practically nil.

Half the reason for keeping a private force of twenty men, Dach included, was in order to keep up appearances as a noble. His purse should have had very little surplus, yet lately Jurgen's financial standing had somewhat improved. As proof of that, he had increased the number of mistresses he kept.

"We do not know if Oddwill's wife might bring information to the palace. I do not think that there is anyone there who would listen to her but in order to be make absolutely sure, this is –"

"I get it, I get it. Do as you like," Jurgen said tolerantly as he waved a hand but his thoughts were easy to read.

Damn you Dach, don't be so overzealous.

They were men that he had lifted up from the position as sword slaves ten years ago. Since, as stated, Jurgen did not maintain his private force out of any pressing need, they might be gotten rid of at any time if they were deemed useless. Here was where they could demonstrate the value of their existence to their master.

Well, whatever. It's cute.

When Dach and the others left the room, Jurgen's mind was already pondering about which mistress to call next time and when that would be.

Two days later, Jurgen Ozt dressed himself in formal wear and rode a carriage to Solon's main palace. Those of his rank would attend court once or twice a month at most.

He gave his periodic report on the development of the mine and chatted light-

heartedly with several nobles of his acquaintance. He also heard an odd piece of gossip while he was there.

“Oh, the Crown Prince did?”

The rumour was about Crown Prince Gil Mephius whose presence had abruptly grown so large both in Solon and in the palace.

But of course, it could have nothing to do with him, he decided optimistically.

That evening, having left the palace, he was about to board his carriage when,

“Oh, Jurgen.”

Near the gate, from where the shadows cast by the setting sun collected, the person at the centre of the rumours suddenly appeared. “M-My. Prince Gil, Your Highness.”

Naturally astonished, Jurgen gave a bow. Gil Mephius, with several attendants following behind him, was grinning frivolously.

Don’t tell me – he had a bad feeling. He remembered the rumour from earlier.

Since about the day before yesterday, Gil Mephius had apparently gone to every noble in Mephius and had squeezed them for money. All the inhabitants of Solon would come to watch the prince’s procession when he departed for Apta. When that happened, he wanted to show off and to splendidly adorn the soldiers, horses and dragons that he would be taking with him.

“Even though he may have accomplished heroic feats, His Imperial Highness is still young,” his aristocratic acquaintances had jeered.

“It looks like he has given up on pestering his scary father for pocket money and intends to extort it from we who are in a weaker position.”

Still, to even come to a destitute noble like me.

Jurgen frowned privately. He had no particular experience of a life of hardship but in front of those from the imperial family – and especially when the other was the ‘foolish’ crown prince who had been raised without knowing want – he

truly felt that he had tasted suffering.

Above all else, he could not stomach the prince's attitude of calling out to him as they he had known him since forever. Up until now, he had always acted as though he knew neither his name nor his face but when it was convenient for him, he sidled up to him with a know-it-all expression.

As expected, the prince asked for money in a roundabout way.

"One such as myself," Jurgen smiled, "is not in a position to be able to lend funds to our august Imperial Prince."

"I heard that recently, you've been strangely prosperous."

"Ha, ha, who has been saying such nonsense?"

Jurgen laughed it off despite feeling a chill. The other nobles would no doubt have mentioned his name to the prince in order to drive him off when he was pestering them for money.

"The nobles have to some extent been gossiping. Would it not be best to pay attention so that this matter does not reach your esteemed father's ears?"

So as to end the conversation quickly, he brought out the name of Gul Mephius, the father whom Gil Mephius would fear above anyone else. As expected, Gil clearly started to pull back.

Hmph – Jurgen did not believe that the 'foolish' prince had accomplished any of the recent heroic feats. In order to somehow lift his prestige, those feats had certainly either been performed by other people or set up so as to make it look as though the prince had accomplished them by himself.

Jurgen held back a sneer, bowed courteously and was about to step into his carriage when,

"Oh, by the way, Jurgen."

"What can I for you?"

Right to the very end – swallowing his inner feelings as he exasperatedly

wondered what it was, Jurgen turned around smiling.

“The affair with Oddwill was so sudden, I can’t believe it.”

His smiling mask fell away and Jurgen was shaken by a violent coughing fit.

“W-What do you mean?”

“Nothing, he just didn’t look like a man who would commit fraud like that. You really can’t judge a book by its cover, I guess. You must have been surprised as well.”

“Y-Yes. I… Yes, indeed.”

It was so sudden and so shocking that Jurgen was unable to fix his expression and kept wiping streams of sweat. He didn’t know how or what he should say.

“Well anyway. I’ve held you back,” Prince Gil said coolly and went back into the palace without sparing him another glance.

Jurgen hurried home. He was going to call for Dach but was informed that he had not yet returned from the search.

Should I increase the number of people, he wondered but he was afraid of digging his own grave by acting in a way that stood out too much. Turning away the mistress who came to visit him at the appointed time, Jurgen shut himself away in his room.

What’s with that damn ‘fool’. He knows Oddwill? Ridiculous. What kind of contact could that man have had with the prince?

Aimlessly and agitatedly, he paced around the room. This situation was impossible to read.

How many times did he reflect that Dach had been right? He should have made sure of absolutely everything. He should have done everything he could to get rid of every hindrance.

Dach finally returned as the sun was about to set.

Having summoned all concerned, Jurgen Ozt, who had been reeling as though caught in a blast, stood in front of Dach with his mouth gaping open.

“What?”

The timing was so excessively good that for a moment he was bewildered and did not hear any more of the report. The next instant however, a delighted expression spread across his face.

“Is that right, you’ve found them?”

“Aye. They escaped to the slums. Based on my men’s report of her appearance, there is no doubt that it is Oddwill’s wife. I have had them follow her, so by tonight we should know where they are living. We will strike tomorrow night.”

“No,” Jurgen shook his head with surprising speed, “tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Attack as soon as you learn where they live. Got it? Do not fail to kill them. Everything has to be settled before dawn.”

His master, who up until then had almost seemed to consider it someone else’s business, had had a complete change of attitude. Dach stared hard at Jurgen’s face for a while but after all, the opponents were two females. He certainly didn’t think that there was any need for excessive caution. “Understood. We will deal with both of them tonight.”

Dach nodded his dragon-like face.

Part 4

Like a dark veil billowing in the wind, the night sky started to rapidly spread out over Sasha’s head. Once the sun had sunk, this alleyway which was currently

almost devoid of any signs of life would be filled with coarse and vulgar laughter or with the piercing noise of a turf war.

Sasha trotted along the unpaved road and hurried to the pawnshop at the end of the alley.

It was different from the pawnshops along the main streets. Stolen goods were often sold there and rumour had it that it was a base for criminal operations.

It also didn't give half the value of shops on the main streets. Still, she couldn't be picky.

The bald-headed owner had a habit of peering at people from below and when she stretched out her hand to receive the money, he forcefully tugged it forward.

"What are you doing?"

As Sasha screamed, she felt his alcohol-laden breath against her ear.

"You'll have a reason too. There are lots of criminals and runaway slaves here."

"Unhand m– Aah! Let go!"

The shop owner was terrifyingly strong and easily pulled her down. As despair as dark as night was descending on Sasha's heart, several shadows approached the shop from outside.

When she heard a sound coming from the window, Alicia hastily stood up and opened it herself.

Orba came in as though trying to hide himself. He was wearing his mask.

"What happened?" He asked when he saw Alicia's agitated state.

"Mama hasn't come back," the girl answered, her gaze more restless than usual. "Normally she should already be back… Say, you didn't see her outside?"

"No."

Nelwin wasn’t in the room yet. That was because it was an hour earlier than when Orba had chased him through the window last time, but even so it was already late at night. He didn’t need to see Alicia’s trembling eyes to understand the depth of her anxiety.

“Where does your mother usually go? If you know where she works, I can go there.”

“Mama…”

After she had gotten that far, the girl’s words broke off. Orba did not press her by asking what was wrong. From within his mask, he simply watched her pale face attentively.

After a short while,

“You don’t know?”

“Mama…, was always at home. But recently, she often goes out…”

As though she was wracked by an invisible pain separate from her restlessness and worry at her mother not coming back, Alicia’s face contorted and she collapsed on the bed.

It looked as though, like with her father, Alicia’s awareness was thrown into disarray when she was about to touch on a specific topic. According to Orba’s guess, that topic was,

The difference between her life ‘before’ and ‘now’.

For some reason, when it came to either her father or her mother, Alicia firmly believed that things were the same as ‘before’. Or she was trying to believe it. But she was also aware of ‘now’. And so, when the discrepancies were pointed out to her from outside, her consciousness became tangled and her heart was almost laid bare by the contradictions.

“Mama is…”

“Wait.”

Suddenly halting Alicia’s words, Orba pressed himself tightly against the wall and peered out of the window through the gap in the curtains.

“W-What is it?”

“Ssh.”

Perhaps overwhelmed by Orba’s suddenly tense mood, Alicia turned pale.

A number of shadows had sprung into sight under Orba's eyes. It was almost as though the filth collected along the evening road had grown human limbs and started to walk but there was no doubt that he could see the gleam of their drawn blades.

“That's...”

A group of swordsmen wrapped in black clothes. There were seven or eight of them.

When Orba put his hand to his waist, he heard Alicia gasp. She had heard the sound of his sword slipping out of its scabbard.

“Orba, what is it? Has something happened outside?”

“Who knows,” Orba answered as he continued to carefully peer out of the window. “But it's unlikely that they're allies. You could say that the evil magician's underlings have been sent after Princess Katjua.”

The gladiator Orba had passed through many scenes of bloodshed but there was the unmistakable sound of tension in his voice. Perhaps because she was sensitively aware of it, ragged breaths started to escape from Alicia's nose and mouth.

Dach was in front of a stone building. In the past, this area of Solon had been at the very foot of the cliffs. Originally, this was a facility which would lodge several labourers.

He had seven of his men with him. Considering their prey, their numbers were excessive. But Dach was by nature the kind of man who moved with caution. He would have preferred to act only after having investigated the surrounding area and the people who lived nearby, but there was no helping it since Jurgen's order was to settle things tonight.

Even now, he had just sharply admonished a subordinate who had been cracking obscene jokes because the opponents were two women.

“If by any chance they escape, my sword will have your blood as compensation.”

Dach's face as he darkly issued that threat was like that of an eastern priest pronouncing a death sentence. And for all that they were a pack of ruffians who bore scars at their ankles, all his men simultaneously fell silent.

The door was soon unlocked and each of them quietly crept in.

Dach was the second to enter.

The people living in the area were mostly penniless thieves who were unlikely to inform on them, but it was of course preferable to leave as little information as possible for any third parties. It would be best if they made it look like a normal robbery.

And so, they would start by murdering the pair. As swiftly as a gust of wind. After that, they would wreck the rooms and tear the clothes off the corpses so as to give the impression of violence and to make people believe that had been the goal from the start.

These were the actions of a brute but then Dach had originally been a sword slave. In order to survive, he had killed countless people. His entire body had been smeared in steaming blood and entrails. He never wanted to go back to that place. Even if he defeated and killed a formidable enemy one day, he might be made to fight two opponents the next day simply at someone else's whim. Even when he slept, tomorrow's hell would steal into his dreams. Many people including his master Jurgen compared Dach to a dragon, but they were completely off. Dach knew better than anyone that his heart was frail and human. That was why he worked so diligently. In order to continue protecting the nights in which he slept under a roof and without nightmares.

Dach was never careless.

Which was why, when he sensed bloodlust coming from his left, he was able pull up his sword and parry.

The one in front of him however had his head split open and died.

Dach shouted “Fall back” and leaped backwards himself. The glitter of steel struck from all directions. As yet more strokes rained down, he returned them with his own sword.

– They had been caught in an ambush.

As the only one to instantly realise as much, Dach shoved into his men while spurring them into action.

It was unclear how many enemies there were. As a blade yet again fell towards him, Dach knocked it away with a sharp swing.

“Dammit!”

“Shit!”

Dach’s men finally started fighting back. The clash of weapons resounded within that shadowy space.

The sound of fighting also reached Alicia’s room on the first floor. As she was blind, her sense of hearing was her only point of contact with the outside world and now that it was dominated by the sound of violence, she was paralysed.

Her heart was beating fast. On top of the fear of imminent danger, for some reason an inexplicable horror was welling up inside her.

His sword in one hand, Orba glanced over towards the girl.

“They’re not likely to simply be thieves,” he said and Alicia’s shoulders shook convulsively. “If they were, they wouldn’t launch an assault here. Any idea why

you’re being targeted?”

“I don’t… have any idea.”

“It might be related to why your mother hasn’t come home.”

“No!” Alicia struggled for breath. “Orba, no. I, if I lose Mama too, no! If Mama goes too… I, I, what do I do?”

“Then remember, Alicia. There has to be something. A reason why thieves came here. There’s definitely a reason why you and your mother are being targeted.”

Orba turned her away in a voice so cold it was cruel.

The fight going on downstairs was not currently a problem. Having expected things to turn out this way, Orba had of course had his men lie in wait inside the building.

Moreover, it was Orba himself who had leaked the information of the whereabouts of ‘Oddwill’s wife and blind daughter’ to Jurgen in the first place. He had guessed that if he did so, Jurgen would definitely make a move and if Orba was right about that move, then there would no longer be any doubt that Jurgen was deeply involved.

Alicia was blinking over and over. It felt as though the turbulent sounds that were reaching her eyes were stirring something in the depths of her heart. It was as if something which had been hidden behind a tightly sealed door had rapidly started waking up as soon as it had sensed the first hint of violence and was now squirming madly.

Violent noises. Blood. Screams…

As though longing to blend into one another, the memories of the past and the current world were stretching out their tentacles through either side of where the door had cracked open, were intertwining, and at any moment now would grasp hold of each other and blow away the seal.

At that moment, there was the sound of someone hurrying up the staircase. But it wasn’t as heavy as when Alicia’s mother Sasha had raced up back when Orba had first visited her room. Alicia noticed of course that they were not her

mother’s footsteps and she suddenly went rigid.

Oh, behind the mask, Orba’s eyes went wide.

The plan had been for his subordinates, Shique included, to settle everything downstairs. That an enemy had managed to cut through even so meant that there must be a formidable swordsman among them.

“Hide,” Orba ordered shortly.

Alicia stood up unsteadily but her feet would not move. It was not only because of fear.

To keep away from the violence, all alone in the darkness… There was a part of her that fiercely resisted that course of action. It was a voice that rose from within her.

“Hurry!”

Orba forced her under the bed where he himself had once hidden. Just at the point where it was unclear whether her figure was concealed or not, the door was violently flung open.

The man who barged in had a face like a dragon’s – Dach.

He rushed at Orba without a second’s hesitation. As though they were synchronized, Orba instantly drew back sideways.

A look of surprise crossed the man’s oval-shaped face as he had not thought it would be possible to dodge. Moreover,

“That mask! You – you’re Orba, the winner of the Sword Festival?”

“I’m honoured that a suspicious-looking thief remembers my face.”

“You’re definitely the crown prince’s… Fuck!”

Dach realised that by coming here they had fallen into a trap. Across from him, Orba answered with a smile but he had little room for manoeuvre. Because of the injury to his collarbone, his right hand only had half of its usual strength. He

would certainly have needed some nerve to fight such a skilled opponent with only his left arm. Which was why he grasped his one-handed sword with both hands.

Dach attacked with enough force to raise a wind.

It was a blow strong enough to smash a person's face in and Orba was barely able to deflect it with the tip of his sword. The left side of his body caught the heavy impact.

If the fight went on for too long, he would be at a disadvantage.

While the two men aimed for their vitals in that narrow room, Alicia's world was nothing but darkness and the crash of sword strikes.

Her heart was racing.

That time too she had been watching like this. And that time too she could only watch without being able to do anything.

I watched… I 'saw'.

Alicia's past and present were now closely entwined and as they swelled up, the locked door in the depths of her heart was wrenched open from within.

That's right, I… I saw...

As the door opened, vivid memories flooded her mind.

That evening, her father and mother were both late coming home. Alicia, who was house-sitting, was bored and thought to surprise her parents who would be coming home tired by hiding under a large set of shelves in the living room.

Her father had come home not long after that but before Alicia could jump out, a visitor had turned up.

It was a middle-aged man who looked like a noble and who was accompanied by an attendant. The noble did not apologise for his rudeness in calling so late and was the first to speak, urging her father to reconsider.

“I’ve told you I will give you a share. What amount would satisfy you?”

Alicia’s father Oddwill gathered and despatched labourers to work in the mines near Solon but Jurgen, the aristocrat who had jurisdiction over those mines, wanted to appropriate for himself a part of the funds allocated for their development.

And so, he had accused the miners on a trumped-up charge and had them reduced into slavery.

Since slaves were a disposable and easily replaceable workforce that didn’t need to be paid any wages, efficiency had increased. Jurgen had apparently tried to bribe Oddwill into keeping this a secret but Alicia’s father had vehemently turned him down.

“It’s also in the country’s interest for the mines to be developed more efficiently. It would be sheer stupidity to let the country decline simply because you’re bothered by a small sacrifice.”

“Enough. That will all be for the palace to decide.” Oddwill had remained firm to the last.

“I see,” said Jurgen, “that you’re a stubborn one.”

The noble had smiled. It was a gentle expression that made you want to smile back but at that moment, Alicia ‘saw’ it. Jurgen had drawn the sword that was at his waist and had pierced her father through the abdomen.

The noble was still smiling. An unthinkable amount of blood had splashed down. Alicia’s entire field of vision and her childish heart both became dyed in the viscous colour of that blood.

Jurgen sighed fiercely and kicked at the silent corpse.

“Set fire to the house later. Wait for two hours after I’m gone, got it?” His rough footsteps were leaving as he spoke.

She could only dimly remember what had happened next.

The men Jurgen had left behind must have been on standby outside the house but

coming home late, her mother had noticed their presence from a distance and had deliberately come in through the backdoor. When she found Alicia, hidden and trembling, and saw the living room spattered in blood, her mother had quickly gathered some luggage together, had taken her daughter by the hand and had fled out of there.

Papa –

The furious clash of steel still raged on.

Since the moment when she had witnessed her father's death, Alicia's sight and memory had been locked away.

She covered her ears with her hands. Her instinct was telling her that the same thing was going to happen again. She mustn't look. If she watched, this time her heart would be torn to shreds.

Somebody –

Inside her heart, Alicia voicelessly cried out for help from a world as dark as night in which there was not a single star to be seen. She could only desperately pray that someone would come and save her from these shadows like the young man had helped Princess Katjua – that guided by a golden bird, they would appear like the main character from a story.

At that moment,

"Oh, is that it for the skill of the winner of the tournament? Clovis whose name you received must be crying," Dach jeered.

Because of his injury, Orba had gradually been forced into a defensive fight. Dach thrust forward. As he retreated, Orba's back hit the wall with the window.

In a flash, Dach started to close the distance.

Orba sensed it with an animal intuition. As it met the fierce blow from Dach's sword, the weapon in his hand would be sent flying in the air and Dach would lunge again in a consecutive attack – it happened just as he had pictured it in that instant.

So Orba placed his foot on the wall behind him, kicked himself off of it, bent forward and dove into Dach's chest.

"Guh!"

Orba's fist slammed into the pit of Dach's stomach.

His breath was cut short, his legs hung still and it looked as though he was about to topple over.

Dach's lower limbs were tough though. With a desperate expression, he shook Orba off. In the empty space between the two of them, he once more raised his sword high.

Was it a coincidence or not?

She thought that she heard a sharp cry then a small shadow suddenly leapt from the direction of the window and slipped into the gap between the two men.

Yamā!

For a moment, it seemed to Alicia as though there were people outlined by a shining light in the darkness in which she had shut herself.

Right now, Alicia could 'see'.

The man with a sword was Jurgen while the masked swordsman facing him was her father himself. And when Yamā soared forward, for a second she 'saw' the twinkle of golden wings.

Before she had realised it, Alicia had leapt out from under the bed. The main character was none other than her. She had always imagined it that way while within that long darkness. She threw herself forward to shield Yamā and in doing so slid between Dach's legs.

Caught by surprise, Dach had his posture thrown off. Seizing that momentary gap, Orba picked up the sword that had rolled at his feet.

Part 5

That night, Jurgen Ozt was waiting for Dach and his men to return. Since the prey had been located, it was no problem to leave the rest to them.

And afterwards, there's Lord 'Fool'.

He briefly recalled the conversation with the crown prince. Since he had brought up Oddwill's name, Jurgen had to consider that he at least had suspicions about what he had done.

Bullshit. A brat who knows nothing of the world, what could he possibly do? He thought as though to shake off his unfathomable dread and unease.

Anyway, Prince Gil would be leaving for Apta any day now. It was simply that he had been running around because he needed money for his preparations and while he was doing so he had heard from other nobles that Jurgen appeared to have become slightly better off. Mentioning Oddwill had merely been a way of threatening him into giving him money.

In any case, the dead don't speak. Neither Oddwill himself nor his wife and daughter could cause Jurgen any harm.

"M-Master," a chamberlain came rushing in, gasping for breath.

"Have they returned?"

Jurgen smiled and turned around. He had drinks prepared to congratulate them on finishing the job and was in the act of holding out a decanter when,

"How thoughtful, Jurgen."

He almost dropped the decanter.

Behind the chamberlain was Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius. And behind him, there was a girl.

"H-Heavens, Your Highness. Why are you here? And so late at night…"

“Oh, you weren’t waiting for me? Then shouldn’t you be keeping these drinks for the guests who will be coming later?”

T-This damn ‘fool’.

Jurgen mentally ground his teeth. He did not know how much the other had grasped but if he could force things to go at his own pace, he should be able to somehow send Gil away. Never mind what would come after that. If he brought out his father’s name, the cowardly Gil Mephius would certainly go scuttling back to the safety of his own room.

“Although this may be presumptuous of me, I cannot say that I admire this, Your Highness. Have you come all the way here to raise war funds? Very well, although I am not in a position of ease, I will give what I can. For today, we can leave it at that. But I would ask that you think about your own position a little. How would His Majesty feel if he knew that the heir to the proud throne of Mephius was calling late at night at the houses of retainers to beg for money?”

“His Majesty, you say…” Gil looked daunted.

Seizing the opening, Jurgen allowed his voice to swell.

“Indeed. For all that you may be the Imperial Crown Prince, do not think that you can get away with acting like a god. As a member of the imperial family of Mephius, responsibly and with moderation –”

“It’s him.”

At that moment, the girl behind Gil pointed a trembling finger at Jurgen.

“What?”

“He is the one who killed Papa –”

Jurgen almost exclaimed out loud but hurriedly closed his mouth.

Oddwill’s daughter?

“You’re sure?” Gil turned to look back at the girl and asked her gently. The girl nodded repeatedly.

“Nonsense,” Jurgen spoke almost without thinking. “This… What kind of jest is this, Your Highness? To make me out to be a murderer… No, this, it must be a trick by someone who wants to catch Your Highness and myself in a trap. Your Highness, please Your Highness, this is –”

“You had best say the same thing in front of His Majesty whom you love so much, Jurgen. This girl saw her father being murdered in front of her very eyes. And having seen your face, she is now testifying that you are undoubtedly the culprit.”

“Utter nonsense! This girl is blind. So how could she know that I’m the culprit…”

“*How* do you know that this girl is blind?”

When those words sliced through him, Jurgen suddenly fell silent.

The next moment, at a sign from Gil, men appeared one after another in Jurgen’s mansion. Among them were some familiar faces. At the head of which was Dach, bound in ropes.

With his captured soldiers dragged before him, there was no longer any means of escape.

His face drenched in cold sweat, plunged up to his neck in a sea of despair, a dangerous thought flitted through a corner of Jurgen’s mind.

Ah –

It looked as though Gil had only brought five Imperial Guards with him. He still had ten soldiers on site. At his signal, they would come rushing into the room.

Since he went out of his way to come here in person, it means that the prince hasn’t told anyone else about this yet. There’s no doubt he just waltzed over to accomplish a feat all by himself. He probably just can’t forget how nice it feels to be showered with praise as a hero.

The prince is known for his erratic behaviour. There’s that rumour that he frequently takes black water lily powder as a stimulant. If I settle things here and make up some excuse later –

It was also very risky of course but as things were he would only fall into ruin anyway. It felt as though the wave of despair that had reached up to his neck had receded to the height of his chest. Now then, in order to attract the other's attention, he would protest about something or another and when he raised his head –

His eyes met those of Prince Gil.

In that instant, a wave higher than Jurgen's head surged up and when its crest came crashing down, it engulfed his entire body.

Although he had a faintly ironic smile on his lips, his eyes were terrifying. Quiet anger burned within them. It felt as though their blaze might be released at any moment and Jurgen would be enveloped in flames.

Of course, Jurgen had no way of knowing.

That Gil Mephius – who was in reality Orba, had been thinking of simply killing him since far back and that he was fiercely fighting the desire to cut Jurgen down here and now.

Jurgen had no way of knowing.

That Mephian soldiers had thrown Orba's family to the flames and that even now his anger and the brand on his back burned from his resolve to exact revenge.

That Orba's eyes were filled with fury on behalf of the women who had been robbed of what they held dear by the high-handed tyranny of a man of power.

Jurgen didn't even realise that he was shaking. His head sank down. It felt as though this time, he had abandoned himself to that sea of despair.

Her nerves probably stretched taunt, Alicia remained standing there, her eyes brimming with tears. Naturally, she didn't know that the masked swordsman Orba and Gil Mephius who was beside her were the same person.

I made her feel scared, thought Orba but he deliberately refrained from speaking. He had previously ordered his men to shadow Alicia's mother, Sasha. By chance, they had been able to save her from her predicament when she visited

the pawnshop but afterwards, as per Orba's plan, she had been held confined for a short while to prevent her from returning.

The mother and daughter had been reunited a short time earlier. If Sasha wanted, Orba intended to find a position at the palace for her.

"Alicia"

"Y-Yes, Prince," Alicia stood rigidly straight at being spoken to by the Crown Prince.

"I have a favour to ask of you. It's about your friend. My sister Flora has constantly been worrying about his whereabouts."

"I understand," Alicia gave a nod then smiled with a somewhat lonely expression. "I was able to meet Orba because Yamā led him to me. And because I met him, my father's name was cleared. Please tell Lady Flora about the exploits of the hero Yamā."

"Of course."

"And also," Alicia was not shy by nature and this was reflected as she spoke with relish for some reason, "please tell Orba something too. I was right and just as I remembered it, Princess Katjua has the very happiest ending."

"I'll pass it on," Orba smiled.

When Gil Mephius gave a heartfelt smile, the like of which he never showed at the palace, the soldiers who were hauling Jurgen away looked a little astounded.

Early one morning, a few days before the departure for Apta.

"This way, Lady Flora."

Vileena Owell had invited Mephius' Imperial Princess out to gardens before breakfast.

Dazzled as she looked up at the sky, Flora cautiously walked across the lawn, one step after another. It had been a long time since she been outside. She had not initially seemed inclined to accept Vileena's invitation but in the end there was no way she could reject the solicitude of a guest from a foreign country.

A small shadow unexpectedly emerged from a corner of the garden.

"Oh my –"

Colour instantly returned to Flora's pale face. Adorned with a new ribbon, Nelwin came running and leapt into Flora's wide-open arms.

Delighted to see him again, Flora rubbed her cheek against his soft fur for some time before turning her attention to the girl who was nervously following behind the cat. The two drew closer to one another and exchanged greetings.

Vileena watched them from a distance along with Gil Mephius who had been waiting in the garden.

"So you kindly took the time to search, Your Highness."

"Ah, er, well," Gil answered somewhat evasively. "Since Orba just happened to have nothing to do."

"Oh? He went through a series of fights at the Sword Festival. Resting is also a part of work. So what is this about 'having nothing to do'?"

"Ah, yeah, right."

Jurgen Ozt had lost his position but he had not been a high-standing noble in the first place. There had only just been the commotion caused by the rebellion during the Founding Festival and in order to keep the people's emotions in check, the matter had not been made public.

Doing something like this won't bring an end to it. Exposing the oppression caused by a single noble and having him fall into ruin would not lighten Orba's heart. The roots of his grudge against all aristocrats, or to go further, against authority itself, ran deep.

Just then, Nelwin, who had been jumping about between the two girls, came

over to Orba and Vileena.

Vileena smiled and half crouched to greet the cat. Orba paid it no attention even though the cat coaxingly called out.

For some reason, the jauntily walking Nelwin then stopped abruptly and suddenly turned back to where Flora and Alicia were waiting.

“What was that about?” Vileena said, half astonished, half indignant.

Orba shrugged. “Even if you ask that, not everything unpleasant in this world is my fault.”

“T-That isn’t –”

“They say that cats have remarkably keen perception. Most likely it saw through you, Princess. Even though you look lovely, you have a terrifyingly fiery temper.”

“Really – Your Highness –”

Orba laughed as Vileena blushed.

In this season, the sky was high above Solon.

At about that same time a few days later, Orba would leave for Apta, which would be labelled by later historians as Imperial Prince Gil’s “Land of Destiny”.

References and Translation Notes

1. ↑ Which is the first floor if you count the European way.

Rakuin no Monshou SS - The Little Fugitive

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